

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

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Whole No. 503

Who Was George H. Coomer?

By S. E. Wallen

PART II

George H. Coomer the Short Story Writer



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 175

HILTON'S DIME BOOKS

Publisher: Hilton & Co., 128 Nassau St., New York, N. Y. Issues: Unknown but at least 12 (the name was changed to Hilton's Union Novels between Nos. 3 and 7). (See DNR No. 488, May 1973 for full discussion of this series). Dates: 1866. Schedule of Issue: Unknown. Size: 6x4". Pages: 100. Price: 10c. Illustrations: Colored cover on yellow paper. Contents: Sea stories, romances, frontier and war stories.

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PART II

George H. Coomer the Short Story Writer

George H. Coomer was born in Bristol, Rhode Island, December 13, 1825. In 1851 he, himself, published his first book—"Miscellaneous Poems." Prior to 1851 he had written soem verse for the *Boston Cultivator* and later, verse for *Golden Argosy* and *The Youth's Companion*.

The earliest short story found to date, is "Burning of the Gaspé," in *Ballou's Monthly Magazine* for February, 1868 (Vol. XXX, #2). George at this time was 43 and this story comes seventeen years after his book of poetry.

Some of the real challenge in this portion of our research is in trying to guess what Coomer was doing to "earn his bread" between writing.

"The Fugitive Slave" (Vol. XXXV, #1, January, 1872), in *Ballou's* was written for adult readers and follows the pattern of most of his prose tales written later for young people by being a story of the sea. But what a plot! A shipwreck, a beautiful heroine, a slave who proves to be a king, and all ending happily.

The years between the book of verse in 1851 and the stories in *Ballou's* are probably accounted for by his occupation as a sailor. Remembering, of course, we at this time have no evidence to indicate that he did any writing between the 1851 verse and much before the story of 1868. (It is quite probable that this supposition will require some adjustment once we check a little further and learn something more about published materials.)

Here is a quote from Coomer's obituary appearing in the *Warren Gazette* of Rhode Island: "In his boyhood he loved to frequent the river front and wharves, where in those days whaling craft and merchantment were always to be found. All the old whaleships and their commanders were familiar figures to the impressionable boy, and he ever retained a rich fund of reminiscence of these features of his early life. . . His sea stories written mainly for boys were of absorbing interest and were always in great demand by publishers. The material for these gathered in his early life on a merchantman and along the Warren river front, admirably equipped the author for the work. He did some of his best work for *The Youth's Companion*, to which he was a liberal contributor for many years. He also contributed many short stories for *Harper's Magazine*, *Munseys* and other periodicals."

Verse, and only one short story by Coomer, "The Digby Ring" in the issue of August 9, 1888 (reported by my good friend, Ralph P. Smith), has been found in *The Youth's Companion*. The few issues of *Munsey's Magazine* examined disclose nothing by George Coomer. The quote above probably refers to *Munsey's Golden Argosy* which accepted both verse and short stories by Coomer. (However Ralph P. Smith writes to tell me of at least seven additional *Munsey* publications that he knows of and there may be more. None

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of these recently named publications have been checked out, due to lack of time and available copies.)

Harper's Magazine at this moment is also unexplored territory.

A "merchantman" is a ship used in commerce; a "whaler" is a ship used in capturing and commercially processing whales. Different names for the same type of ship? Or, maybe, two distinct types of vessels?

The life of George H. Coomer during the intervening years from poetry to full-time writing may always be somewhat of a mystery. Gaps of this type are usually filled in by reference to letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, etc. A serious biographer would look into this. Here, for our purposes, we will have to accept as a fact that if any of this supporting evidence really was preserved, much of it could have been destroyed in the Bristol Library fire mentioned in our first installment.

Earliest Coomer was prior to his 1851 book of verse when he was 26 years of age. How early do we want to "guess" on his *Boston Cultivator* publishing years? Would five years be fair and generous? This would make George H. Coomer 21 in 1846.

The latest apparently "first" or "new" writing we have found, discounting the "repeats" or "re-printing" era, seemed to be *Golden Days* through 1894, until we turned up a single story, after a long lapse in *Argosy*, printed (or re-printed) in June of 1899.

This gives us, speculatively, an approximate total of 53 years of writing. With many links missing from the chain, we have actually a very conservative record of 142 short stories, 12 serials or series and 97 poems. Taking for granted that it was not much easier to sell a story in those days than it is now, we account for a good portion of his time while he was not out chasing whales or whatever.

Sea tales and hunting stories were the "real meat" for the readers of *Golden Days* and, of course, this was George H. Coomer's strength in holding his readers. While the obituary is vague about his life on the sea, the following hints in some of his short stories speak of a wide field of experience for observation (or dreaming?). It is reasonable to believe that in the early days of seafaring, boys went to sea as apprentice seamen in their very early teens—so George H. Coomer may have composed some of his early poetry as a young sailor, storing up prose plots and experiences at the same time.

There were two important publishing procedures of the period under examination that should be kept in mind as we do some plain and fancy guessing. Often, if the writer pleased the editor, more than one poem, article or story by the same author appeared in a single issue. To conceal this lack of a large pool of writers from which to select material needed for a single issue, the editor would use a variety of pen names to conceal the author's true identity. (We do not, however, have any reason at this time to think that G. H. Coomer ever used a pseudonym.)

Secondly, many editors used material without author credit. Of course, this could be because much of the filler was written by the editorial staff, if not actually "lifted," a polite word for "stolen," from another publication. Many times, however, the original source of "borrowed" material was credited.

Attention to confusing methods of printing and re-printing is plainly brought to our attention in the introduction to Donald L. Steinhauer's *Biobibliographic Listing (of) Golden Days* published by DIME NOVEL ROUNDUP: "The first cycle of (serial) stories appeared in the first seventeen volumes (of *Golden Days*), although even in the latter issues of these the 'repeats' were beginning to take place. All in all, the serials of the major authors practically had a 'double' run.

"It is interesting to note on the second run, how author's names were sometimes changed . . ." As we will see in the next and final installment, which examines Coomer's book length stories, *Golden Days* at least, reprinted his serials without bothering to change the author's name. This "double run" of Coomer's applied as well to his short stories.

Speaking of the re-run of the continued stories of Coomer's, it is quite probable that when it came to re-printing the short stories, titles, if not the author's name, may have been changed. When we come to listing the titles of these shorter pieces, a number look suspiciously as though they might be the same tale with a different heading. Unfortunately, such close checking requires more time than we have attempted to give. As Steinhauer says in his good pamphlet with reference to a failure to check out all pen names—neither have we attempted such a huge task. It would mean reading every story published in the 1,419 issues of *Golden Days*; requiring a lifetime of hours and days.

While much fiction is autobiographical, it may still be fiction. The following quotes (taken usually near the beginning of a story) may give some clues as to George H. Coomer's actual life on the sea. Nearly every sea story (much the greater number are stories of the sea) speaks of a ship by name and often its geographical position. We also get a number of suggestions that George Coomer may have "gone to sea" at an early age.

Here are some examples:

"The new bark Mary Brewer, in which I once sailed . . . I was quite young, and this was my first whaling venture, but as I had been for a year or two in the merchant service . . ."

Another story tells of his serving on a whaler named *Andromache*.

"In 1864, (Coomer would then have been 39) during the Sleswick Holstein war between Denmark and the German Powers, I sailed from: Havana for Cronstadt in the bark *Creole* . . . and I being the only one of our crew who knew anything of the Danish language . . ."

"At the age of seventeen (that would have been in 1842), the writer made a voyage to Venezuela as one of the hands of the brig *Falcon* . . ."

"While I was mate of the brig *Regulator* . . ."

"Oid Jack Smith was our ship-keeper on board the *Boy*. He had been a privateersman in the war of 1812 . . . We youngsters of the crew loved dearly to gather about him (as he recounted his adventures) . . ."

Before you ask, we'll ask: What is a "ship-keeper"?

Later we mention articles by Coomer on the War of 1812. It would be, presumably, as this writer and some of our readers would have listened to stories of our own Civil War when we were young, some forty years after the event.

"When I sailed from home in the brig *Pocasset*, bound to *Natanzas* . . . I was seventeen (this would have been in 1842), and in consideration of my having already accomplished a two-years' freighting voyage in the Chinese and East Indian waters, was put down as ordinary seaman—a term designating one who although, in some measure, acquainted with nautical duties, is not yet a sailor . . ."

If he was seventeen in 1842 with two years experience he must have been at sea as early as 1840, or at the age of 15!

"There is not much in luck (said my good old captain), and some of the privateers of 1812 were wonderfully lucky.

"The Blockade was a new brig when I first went on her, and I was a new sailor, for I had never been to sea before . . ."

Many of these quotations from his stories sound very much as though

based on fact, wouldn't you say?

Some of his informative material is interesting to "landlubbers" who know little about the ways of sailors and the sea: "When I sailed in the brig Arabia, of about two hundred tons, bound for Singapore and elsewhere, she had before the mast four men and four boys—I being one of the latter. A West Indian or European trader would not have taken so many boys; but upon a long freighting voyage in the Malay Archipelago, the case was different.

"We were shipped for almost no wages and the owners knew that we would all be tolerable sailors before passing the Strait of Sunda . . ."

George Coomer must have had little time for a formal education, but he certainly shows a knowledge of good English and an excellent vocabulary.

And as a final example: "A good many years ago, when I was a boy, I sailed with Captain Brown of the brig Orphelia which was then loading at the wharf in Palermo. He had already six foremast hands, but he took me as a sort of supernumery, to bunk with the crew in the forecabin, and stand regular watch with them, and also to do odd jobs in the cabin, when necessary . . ."

Wouldn't we enjoy a nice leisurely chat with George H. Coomer? "When I was a boy" cannot but make one wonder how he could be halfway around the world looking for a job!

So much of this sounds more like truth than fiction—or, maybe better stated, actual experiences drawn upon for story telling. These accounts are also historical proof that all child labor was not an American institution to be found only in the cotton fields of the south, nor the cotton mills of the north.

A few general remarks about the good "ship" *Golden Days* remain to be mentioned.

Advance notices of "coming attractions" seems to be reserved only for serial stories—short stories by such more popular (probably) writers than Coomer, such as Optic, Ellis, etc. aren't even so honored. No doubt, cost had something to do with this, a continued tale commanding a much higher purchase price and demanding every effort to recruit new subscribers and increase the number of readers.

Golden Days did not make a practice of printing obituary notices, but they did recognize the death of Oliver Optic (William Taylor Adams). No other such notices were found although a special check was made to locate some report of Coomer's passing. He had only written 123 short stories and 4 serials for them, yet they did not deem it important that, even after having begun to reprint the lot, his death should be mentioned.

A frustrating feature of this period, today, was the regularly featured "Letter Box" which printed all sorts of answers to all sorts of peculiar (to say the least) inquiries; how the readers must have turned to it before they even began to read a story! Unfortunately, since only the answer was given, and the question not published, it was not always possible to be certain about the subject matter. At least we were given an insight into a child's wide range of interests and imagination. To add to the confusion, the type size of the "Letter Box" was so small that one nearly goes blind trying to read it. The quantity of helpful information that may be dug out by today's specialist cannot be recommended as worth the effort involved. After going through hundreds of these columns, using a magnifying glass, the effort to learn anything of real value about George Coomer from this source was finally discontinued.

One such "gem," apparently the reply to an inquiry as to why not more girl heroines, was answered in this manner: "Grace T. (1) The heroine of the

serial commenced last week—"In Search of Himself"—is a noble character, and our girl readers will doubtless feel highly delighted in following her fortune." This was in reference to a George H. Coomer serial and, as shown, the answer was possibly more silly than the question. It would appear that **Golden Days** were most optimistic about their writers as well as of their readers. (By-the-way, the "1" in the quotation above apparently referred to the order of the questions presented by the subscriber; this, we presume, being Grace T's first question of several.

As a general practice **Golden Days** was printed on a grade of paper much superior in quality to **Golden Argosy**, but in 1892 and 1893 **Golden Days** came off the press printed on a paper that had dried and become yellowed and brittle through the years. This was true of a number of the juvenile periodicals of the period, obviously in an effort to save a few pennies in the overall production costs.

In the re-printing of "A Glad Deliverance" (Vol. XVIII, #20, dated 4/3/1897) **Golden Days** credited the story to Geo. H. Coomer—the only exception to the customary "George H. Coomer."

Here is a listing of the titles of Coomer's stories in the first fifteen volumes of **Golden Days** (Vol. I of 1880 through Vol. XV of 1894). The actual checking was carried through #18 of Vol. XXII, 1901. The one exception was Vol. XIX of 1898 which was missing from the collection being checked. However, since reprints of earlier short stories began as early as 1895 (Vol. XVI), the contents of Vol. XIX doubtless had nothing new to offer. Repeats of serials by Coomer began with Vol. XXII of 1901.

Vol. I—1880	#22	7/31	The African King
	#28	9/11	A Fortunate Gale.
	#31	10/2	With the Sons of Ham.
	#32	10/9	Under the Pole Star
	#33	10/16	In the Grasp of Odin.
	#36	11/6	The Forecastle Ventures.
	#37	11/13	A Glad Deliverance.
	#37	11/13	A Glad Deliverance.
Vol. II—1881	#2	12/8	Blown Out to Sea.
	#5	1/8	Our Brig's Cook.
	#9	2/5	Sunday Whaling.
	#12	2/26	Half-Mast.
	#22	5/7	A Streak of Luck.
	#24	5/21	"Cutting Out."
	#29	6/25	A Dangerous Whale.
	#33	7/23	The Boatswains Whistle.
	#36	8/13	A Pitched Battle.
	#38	8/27	The Blue-Jackets' Feud.
	#39	9/3	The Prize-Masters' Prize.
Vol. III—1882	#40	9/10	The Ship Race.
	#42	9/24	Coming Down Channel.
	#48	11/5	Lost in Venezuela.
	#1	12/10	A Narrow Escape.
	#4	12/31	Startled in Earnest.
	#8	1/28	"Running" Coffee.
	#26	6/3	A Shipwrecked Crew.
	#28	6/17	A "Domestic" Animal.
Vol. IV—1883	#34	7/29	Unwelcome Neighbors.
	#41	9/16	Arthur Somers, or A Boy Among the Whalers (Serial)
	#2	12/16	Jaquars at Sea.

	#30	6/30	An Alert Enemy.
	#46	10/20	At Hide and Seek.
	#47	10/27	The Pet Leopard.
Vol. V—1884	#6	1/12	Up the Gulf of Bothnia.
	#12	2/23	Mosquitoes at Home.
	#35	8/2	An East Indian Hurricane.
	#45	10/11	The Cotton Ship.
Vol. VI—1885	#1	12/6	"Flora."
	#9	1/31	The Blind Girl.
	#27	6/6	Native Cunning.
Vol. VII—1886	#10	2/6	The Stranger's Dog. (Lead story.)
			Note: Before this the "lead" or "cover" story had not been noted.
	#24	5/15	A Desperate Situation. (Lead story.)
	#31	7/3	Felling a Big Tree.
	#37	8/14	A Novel Bull Fight. (Lead story.)
	#46	10/16	A Thrilling Spectacle. (Lead story.)
Vol. VIII—1887	#8	1/22	A Queer Mistake.
	#15	3/12	Otho's Leap.
	#21	4/23	Ashore by Lake Maracaybo.
	#22	4/30	In Search of Himself: A Tale of Dangerous Adventure. (Serial)
	#34	7/23	Our Greyhound Hestor.
	#39	8/27	A Surprise Indeed.
	#49	11/15	Disputed Title, The; or, Perseverance under Difficulties. (Serial)
Vol. IX—1888	#10	2/4	A "Strike" on Shipboard.
	#16	3/17	Johnny Barlow's Tame Bear.
	#28	6/9	Besieged by Wildcats. (Lead story.)
	#46	10/13	Exchange No Robbery.
	#51	11/7	The Young Explorers. A Tale of Land and Sea. (Serial)
Vol. X—1889	#5	12/29	A Christmas Episode.
	#9	1/26	A Fearful Half-Hour.
	#11	2/9	A Serious Predicament.
	#13	2/23	A Fight with a Sea-Serpent.
	#25	5/18	Taking a "Dilemma" by the Horns.
	#35	7/27	Not in the Bills.
	#44	9/28	A Mad Whale.
	#48	10/26	A Thrilling Peril in the Ice.
	#52	11/23	The Pilot's Stratagem.
Vol. XI—1890	#6	1/4	The Black Horse Pontiac. (Lead story.)
	#10	2/1	A Run for Life. (An Indian Story.)
	#17	3/22	The Hero of the School.
	#24	5/10	Our Strange Rescuers. (Lead story.)
	#27	5/31	Uncle John's Rifle.
	#29	6/14	Now or Never (A True Sketch of 1810) (Lead story.)
	#37	8/9	Attacked from the Clouds.
	#40	8/30	The Terrible Jaguar. (Lead story.)
	#47	10/18	A Mad Dog on Shipboard. (Lead story.)
Vol. XII—1891	#1	11/29	A Capture Single-Handed.
	#3	12/13	Ashore in Benin. (Lead story.)
	#15	3/7	A Brave Girl's Adventure.

- #24 5/9 The White Crow. (Lead story.)
 #33 7/11 The Gourd Helmets. (Lead story.)
 #37 8/8 An Unspeakable Peril.
 #46 10/10 An Unwelcome Shipmate. (Lead story.)
 Vol. XIII—1892 #2 12/5 The Biggest Moose in Maine.
 #7 1/9 The Captain's Lesson.
 #18 3/26 An Astonished Elephant. (Lead story.)
 #24 5/7 A Trick that Failed. (Lead story.)
 #47 10/15 In Tow of a Shark. (Lead story.)
 Vol. XIV—1893 #35 7/29 Among the Condors. (Lead story.)
 #49 10/28 Chased by Gorillas. (Lead story.)
 Vol. XV—1894 #2 12/2 Adrift in a Fog.
 #11 3/3 A Singular Rescue.
 #23 4/38 A Fight with a Deer. (Lead story.)
 Vol. XVI—1895 Has five reprinted stories (in #24, 32, 38, 41, 42)
 #47 10/12 Our Cowboy Shipmate. (A new title.)
 Vol. XVII—1896 Has three reprinted stories (in #24, 26 and 29)
 Vol. XVIII—1897 Has seven reprinted stories (in #3, 5, 11, 20, 30, 35, 37, 43)
 The new titles in 1897 were:
 #5 12/19 Benny and the Lion. (Lead story.)
 Note that one of the reprints is mentioned above, the only instance we noticed of two Coomer titles in one issue.
 #17 3/13 Borrowing a Ship (An Old Time Sea Story).
 #51 11/6 Waiting for a Fair Wind.
 Vol. XIX—1898 The missing volume that was not checked—the probabilities are that the majority, if not all, stories in this volume are reprints of earlier material. (Coomer is 73 years of age at this time.)
 Vol. XX—1899 Has five reprinted stories (in #5, 13, 31, 37 and 44.)
 #12 2/4 Adrift in an Ice Field. (Lead story.)
 #24 4/29 A Mysterious Crew. (Lead story.)
 Vol. XXI—1900 Has five reprinted short stories (in #3, 11, 37, 40, 47).
 The Serial "In Search of Himself" is re-run in this vol.—#22
 Vol. XXII—1901 Stopped checking with #18. Found three reprinted short stories (in #3, 7, 13). Coomer is no longer living at this time.

Two general observations at this point: Unfortunately we did not note when Coomer's stories were "lead stories" during the first six years of publication of *Golden Days*. Taking note of this factor beginning with Vol. VII, it appears to have been a compliment repeated again and again. Even the reprint of "Our Greyhound Hector" first appearing in Vol. VIII, #34, 7/23/87, is the "lead story" on its second time around in Vol. XXI, #3 of 12/2/1909. Either George H. Coomer was considered very good or *Golden Days* was quite desperate for good material.

The last short story of Coomer's which appeared a few days before his death was a reprint of "A Christmas Episode," which first was used in December, 1888—had its second printing in Vol. XXI, #7, December 29, 1901. He probably never knew that it was making this second appearance. Because of his death and there was no expectation of finding any new material in *Golden Days*, we stopped our checking in March of 1901, although reprints as fillers may have gone on and on until publication was discontinued in May of 1907.

A definite check of *Golden Argosy* is not nearly as complete, although, as in *Golden Days*, Coomer's stories were showing up most often in the early years. *Golden Argosy* began in 1883 and with Vol. VI completed in Novem-

ber of 1888, its name and format was changed, the "Golden" was dropped and the "new" *Argosy* seemed to be designed to appeal somewhat more to the older reader. The following listing is as interesting in what we have to report as it is in the "unknown" contents of issues still to be located:

Vol. I—1883	#6	1/13	Gets off to a "good start" by calling George H. Coomer, George M. in the first story: Mrs. Merton's Dog "Leon." (Name then corrected)
	#7	1/20	Sheep in Wolves Clothing.
	#9	2/3	Uncle Ben's Story.
	#11	2/17	A Girl at Sea.
	#12	2/24	Among the Blacks of Africa.
	#15	3/17	The poem: "The Vacant School-lot."
	#19	4/21	The poem: "The Present Hour."
	#33	7/21	The Boys in the Forecastle, A Tale of Real Ships and Real Sailors. (Serial.)
Vol. II—1884	#6	11/12/1883	Our 'Plum Pudding' Voyage.
	#8	11/26	Susie's Ordeal.
	#15	3/15/1884	The Two Boys.
	#22	5/3	Benny's Devotion.
	#29	6/21	Charlie's Trophies.
	#30	6/28	Friends in Need.
	#47	10/25	A Fearful Peril.
Vol. III—Missing; not checked.			
Vol. IV—1886	#12	2/20	Saved by a Fox.
	#21	4/24	The Giant Slave.
	#28	6/12	A Native Eden.
	#39	8/28	The Wild Bee Hive.
	#41	9/11	Wrecked in Guinea.
Vol. V—1887	#1	12/4/86	Mrs. Merton's Dog "Lion." (Sound familiar? See first story in <i>Argosy</i> #6 1/13/1883—maybe they wanted to correct that middle initial?)
	#1	12/4/86	The poem: "The Crew of the <i>Argosy</i> ."
	#2	12/11/86	A Scarlet Panther.
	#5	1/1/87	Chased by a Moose. (Lead story.)
	#6	1/8	Boarded by Polar Bears.
	#9	1/20	A Strange Experience.
	#20	4/16	An Elephant in the Hayfield. (Lead story.)
	#34	7/23	Tom Gale's Ride. (Lead story.)
	#49	11/5	A Brave Defense.
Vol. VI—1888	#2	12/10/87	Otho's Prisoners.
	#5	12/31/87	Our Jaquar Skins.
	#9	1/28/88	Our First Great Hunt.
	#13	2/25	Death in the Treetops.
	#28	6/9	Camping Out
	#33	7/14	The Old Man of the Mountains, or The Railroad Among the Andes. (Serial.)
	#39	8/25	A Brave Yankee Skipper.
	#43	9/22	With Gun and Paddle.
	#44	9/29	On the Pampas
	#45	10/6	Lost in the Snow.
	#50	11/10	The Elephant at Home.

NOTE: The following volumes were missing from the collection checked—so there is no record of stories: Vols. VII through XVIII, to September 1894. *Argosy* during this period was running in two volumes to the year. The

following volumes were checked without producing any material by George H. Coomer: running now three volumes to the year: Vols. XIX, XX and XXI. The next three volumes were missing from the collection: XXII, XXIII and XXIV. The following volumes were available and checked: XXV, XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII and XXIX.

Vol. XXX — #4, June, 1899 — A Captain in a Thorsand.

Checking continued through Vols. XXXI, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXIV and the last was XXXV ending in March, 1901—with nothing further uncovered.

Ralph P. Smith has done some checking in Ballou's Monthly Magazine which has uncovered the following Coomer stories:

Vol. 30—February, 1868—Burning of the Gaspe.

Vol. 35—January, 1872—The Fugitive Slave (In author's collection.)

Vol. 36—October, 1873—Man O War's Man.

May, 1873—The Impressed Seaman.

Vol. 37—October, 1874—The Old Sailor's Story.

Vol. 44—January, 1881—Raymond Mortimer. (Serial.)

Vol. 43—1880—Three stories in the year: Greyback on the Coast; The Columbian Privateer; Old Jack's Story.

Vol. 46—1883—First series of "Privateers of 1812"—seven articles.

With this very incomplete recording of appearances known to have been in Ballou's we conclude this discussion of George H. Coomer's short stories.

End of Part II

Part III, and the final installment will recount his work as a writer of serial-length stories and his few books.

WANTED

Adams—Pioneer Boys of Kansas

Ackers—Boy Fortune Hunters in Yucatan

Barbour—Adventures of Tom Marvel, Bases Full, Five Dollar Dog, Kick Formation, Fourth Down

Bonehill—The Island Camp, Oscar the Naval Cadet

Burton—Bob's Hill Series—Many

Crump—Jack Straw Series—Any

Earl—The Honor of the School Team

Hale—Jack Race Series—Any

Hamilton—Butt Chanler Series—Any

Hendryx—Connie Morgan Prospector, In Arctic

Hoover—Campfire Boys in African Jungle, In Borneo

Kelland—Catty Atkins Sailorman

Stevens—The Young Apprentice

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THE REAL ROBIN HOOD

By W. O. G. Lofts

(Conclusion)

It is reputed that Robin Hood vowed never to expose his sweetheart to the perils of maternity, for life and death might hinge on the need to run at a moment's notice from Sherwood to Barnsdale. Probably this is the reason why Robin and Maid Marian never had a son and heir.

Unlike the usual fairy-story ending, history relates that the romance between Robin Hood and Maid Marian ended tragically, when she was poisoned by a messenger of King John's in Dunmow Prior in 1213. Thus King John not only got his revenge on Marian for having spurned his advances, but dealt a cruel blow to his enemy, Robin, at the same time.

Many famous people in history have scoffed at Sweet Maid Marian's "purity"—one writer of the 15th century stating that it was as much a misnomer as the name of Little John. And William Shakespeare, in King Henry IV, refers to the Maid in a most derogatory manner as a "strumpet"—which one feels was both unfair and unjust to the Sweet Maid Marian.

Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men lived mainly on the King's deer. To obtain clothing and other necessities they robbed wealthy merchants and rich churchmen who happened to pass along the highways through or near Sherwood Forest. As mentioned earlier Robin could claim to be the greatest archer of all time, as he once fired an arrow over a measured mile (1,760 yards)! It was reputed that Little John also equalled this feat, but no man has been able to do so since. Toxophilites inform me that it is impossible to shoot an arrow more than half that distance today, using a steel or fibre-glass bow; and at first sight such a feat as Robin's would seem impossible. Nevertheless, records exist proving that this did occur.

(My own researches into the question of archery records divulge the fact that the longest recorded distance an arrow was fired was 972 yards 2¾ inches, and this was achieved by a Sultan of Turkey in the year 1798.)

Hearing of Robin Hood's prowess with his bow the Abbot of Whitby Abbey invited him and Little John to show their dexterity. They each fired an arrow from the top of the abbey and where each arrow fell the Abbot erected a memorial in the shape of a pillar. Robin's arrow landed in a field, thereafter called Robin Hood's Field; and Little John's missile landed in another field now known as Little John's Field. Both these fields are more than a measured mile in distance from Whitby Abbey, and both the names of these fields are officially recorded in old deeds of the ground.

How can this remarkable achievement be explained? Apparently our hero and his companion could almost double the accomplishments of modern Toxophilites, using six-foot yew longbows. Like most of the old arts and skills, archery seemed to have died a quick death about 1540, in the time of Henry VIII. The introduction of artillery and matchlock-guns sounded the death-knell of the famous bowmen of Cressy and Agincourt; and the gradual deterioration of this old skill was lamentable.

Many famous people in history have regretted the decline in the skill of the bow and arrow. Bishop Latimer, in the sixth of his famous sermons given before Edward VI, once stated (perhaps aptly) that "We have now taken up whoring in the towns instead of shooting in the fields"—a somewhat undignified statement for one of his high position.

Robin Hood and his outlaws continued for many years to fight bitterly against oppression—mainly represented by the Sheriff of Nottingham. It is worth recording that there were several sheriffs in office during Robin's

lifetime, although they were never mentioned by name in the chronicles of the outlaws. One of them was a Ralph Murdach, who also controlled Derby during the reign of Richard I, and some years preceding; whilst another was a William Brewerre, whose exact period of office is somewhat obscure.

Another arch enemy was Sir Guy of Gisborne—a henchman of Prince John, then ruling the country in the absence of his brother, King Richard, who was fighting in the Crusades. But in all his encounters with these enemies Robin Hood always managed to get out of his difficulties by his brilliant use of the bow and quarter-staff—above all, by sheer resourcefulness and courage as well as good leadership. Despite being always on the run and living in very rough circumstances, Robin Hood always remained the idol of the poor and oppressed, helping them with the riches he extracted from the wealthy.

Easily the most oft-told Robin Hood's feats was that of rescuing people captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham, and saving them practically at the very foot of the gallows. Probably the best-known anecdote concerns a widow's three sons. Meeting her on the road one day, weeping and wailing, Robin Hood learned that the woman's three sons had been captured and taken to Nottingham to be hanged that very day. Their offense was that they had shot at the King's deer—not even killing one.

Promising to bring them safely back to her, Robin hastened towards the town, where on the way he met an old palmer. The outlaw changed clothes with him and went his way; in the market square he came face to face with the Sheriff himself, who was searching for a hangman to hang the three miscreants. Not recognizing Robin he asked him if he would execute the three men. Instead the outlaw brought his horn from his pocket and gave a loud blast upon it, bringing one hundred and fifty of his men to the scene. The three sons were rescued and went back to the forest to join Robin's band.

Another sensational rescue was when one of Robin's faithful band was due to be hanged in the market square. Disguising himself this time as a monk, the outlaw leader asked permission to give the last rites to the doomed man. Just as he concluded his prayers Robin threw off his monk's clothing, cut the hangman's rope, and both he and the prisoner sped swiftly away to the safety of the forest before the astounded Sheriff and his men had got over their surprise.

Although many people disbelieve these deeds of daring, one must surely give them some credence, especially when we read of present-day escapes from prison and the law which are probably even more sensational and difficult than in Robin Hood's days.

Shooting was of course the major sport in those days and a skillful archer could win big rewards for his prowess with bow and arrows. The biggest prizes were the Queen's Prize and the Golden Arrow. Nothing daunted at his outlawry, which naturally disqualified him as an entrant, Robin Hood would put on one of his many disguises and succeed in bringing back the trophies to Sherwood Forest—much to the dismay of the authorities after the event, when they learned of his true identity.

Robin Hood certainly did not confine his activities to those districts surrounding Sherwood and Barnsdale, as another anecdote will show. When the hue-and-cry over him became so great that parties of soldiers were even sent from London to try to apprehend him, the outlaw would go to a small village and bay between Whitby and Scarborough, in Yorkshire.

One day, fishing far from the shore, Robin and his companions are said to have encountered some French pirates. In the resulting battle they suc-

ceeded in capturing the French ship and returned with twelve thousand pounds in gold. Most was given to the poor people of the village, who greatly rejoiced in their good fortune; while Robin Hood himself no doubt felt that his fishing-trip had been well worth while. There does seem an authentic ring to this story, as the locality today is still called Robin Hood's (Robyn Huddes) Bay, even as it was known in medieval days.

Always loyal to King Richard, Robin is supposed to have met him once in Sherwood Forest where he begged, on his knees, for pardon for his many offences. It is not recorded whether or not he received this pardon; but the question is immaterial in view of the death of Richard the Lionheart a little later, when subduing a Normandy rebellion. Richard's death brought Robin's arch enemy, Prince John, to the throne and in full force against him in 1199.

Sir Guy of Gisborne, a great friend of King John, was killed by Robin—who sent his head as a present to the Sheriff of Nottingham. But despite the efforts of the unpopular King, he never succeeded in capturing Robin Hood.

King John died in 1216 and the boy, Henry III, came to the throne, where he was to reign for over fifty years. Huge rewards were offered by the new monarch for the apprehension of Robin Hood, and records show that Robin was, indeed, held prisoner in the dungeons of Nottingham Castle several times, each time escaping with the assistance of Little John. One wonders why, having captured Robin, his captors did not immediately put him to death; but allowed him to escape each time—almost as if they had been granted a preview of the films which were to be made more than seven hundred years later.

But Robin Hood was getting older now and the hardships and trials of being always on the run were beginning to tell. Escaping yet again from Nottingham dungeons, Robin Hood fell sick with fever and was forced to flee northwards to South Yorkshire. He took refuge in Kirk Ley's Priory, with his cousin the Prioress. Women in those days—and particularly nuns—were better skilled in surgery and medicine than men; and Robin Hood asked his cousin to bleed him, a popular remedy in medieval times for all kinds of ills. The Prioress, whether by accident or to gain favor with King Henry III (perhaps even in revenge against the outlaws for their vendettas against the Church) "bled" him too much; and the man who had never harmed a woman in his life, and had survived hundreds of battles, lay dying alone in the West Riding of Yorkshire—killed by a woman.

When he realized he was dying, Robin Hood managed to blow a weak call on his bugle, which was heard by the ever faithful Little John. Little John made haste to the chamber and was filled with rage and horror at the manner in which his leader had been treated. In revenge for this treachery he wanted to burn down the nunnery, but Robin refused to allow him to do so. He requested that his beloved bow and arrow be handed to him and then he fired his last arrow, which sped from the Priory and into the forest. He asked that where it landed there he should be buried.

Little John later found the arrow and Robin Hood was laid to rest on the 18th November 1247. If the date of his birth is correct he certainly lived to a ripe old age—being in his 37th year!

Kirleys (with a different spelling) certainly does exist in Yorkshire, belonging now to Sir George Armytage, where it not only boasts the grave of Robin Hood but his bow and arrow as well, hanging in the chancel. The original nunnery in the deanery of Pontefract was Benedictine, founded in honor of the Virgin Mary by Reynours Flandrensis in the reign of King Henry II. Experts strongly disagree, however, with the inscription on the tombstone

and many say it does not bear the script which was used at the time of Robin Hood's death, but that of a much later period. The stone has also been lifted up and the ground underneath found to be undisturbed, obviously no body being there. Other reports claim that the stone was moved from another place a short distance away—another controversy to add to the many surrounding the story of Robin Hood.

If Robin Hood's resting-place may be in some dispute, it cannot possibly equal the mystery surrounding the grave of Little John. After the death of his leader he is reported to have fled to Ireland, where the Emerald Isle claimed his last resting-place. But Scotland also claims his grave; although I personally believe the most likely place is in England, at the village of Hathersage, about six miles from Castleton in Derbyshire. Certainly the morbid curiosity of a grave-opener many years ago would seem to confirm this view, for the bones were unearthed of a man whose gigantic proportions could quite conceivably have been those of Little John.

In recent years researches by noted historians have brought to light new facts on Robin Hood, but to me they seem only to add to the controversy. The name of Robin Hood has been found in officially recorded documents on the Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, and again on the household expenses of King Edward II. Both these "Robin Hoods" were archers, one of them an outlaw.

I do not dispute the authenticity of these records, but I cannot see why one should accept these individuals as our outlaw. Hood was a very common name in medieval days, whilst there were probably many imitators who imagined themselves as famous as the Outlaw of Sherwood Forest. Indeed, a well-known thief who operated in Surrey and Sussex in 1417 called himself Friar Tuck.

The fame of Robin Hood spread most rapidly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when literature became more popular and easier to produce. Shakespeare, in "As You Like It" mentions him, when the old Duke is said to live in the Forest of Arden with "a many merry men" like the old Robin Hood of England. Plays, and especially Morris Dances, featuring Robin, were also in abundance.

So popular was Robin Hood that a Scottish preacher in 1714, finding that several of his congregation had disappeared when his sermon was due, said in his afternoon prayers: "Now, Lord, thou seest that many people go away from hearing thy word; but had we told them stories of Robin Hood they would have stayed; and yet none of these are near so good as thy word that I preach."

With the commencement of boys' literature in the "Penny blood" format, Robin Hood, like Dick Turpin, became a naturally popular theme for boys who loved the adventures of such swashbuckling heroes. But even classic tales were somewhat changed and especially Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe," where he used his author's license to the full by changing Robin Hood to Locksley.

Easily the most popular of Robin Hood stories was the Aldine Robin Hood Libraries. Starting on the 19th October 1901 they ran for 88 issues. With their yellow covers with colored pictures drawn by F. W. Boyington, the tales were written by a syndicate of writers. Alfred S. Burrage, Charles E. Brand, Roderick Dare, H. Phillpot Wright, Escott Lynn, Singleton Pound, A. W. Bradley, G. C. Glover, Ogilvie Mitchell, and Richard Mant. Reprint series followed. 1912/14 (14 issues), 1924/27 (88 issues) and 1930 (3 issues).

The Amalgamated Press also published a Robin Hood Library in the 1919/20 period which ran for 57 issues. All these tales were written anonymously by an Australian R. Coutts Armour, but they are rated very poor

material compared to the Aldine's. The coming of films, saw another boom in the fame of Robin Hood. After several minor obscure versions starting in 1909, Douglas Fairbanks made the first big-scale production in 1922. Actors in later years include Errol Flynn (probably the best), Cornel Wilde, Richard Greene (also a long T.V. series), John Derek, Jon Hall, Richard Todd, Al Hedison, Robert Clarke, Harold Warrender, Don Taylor, Lex Barker, and Barrie Inghain.

As Leslie Charteris, creator of *The Saint*, told me when I wrote a slightly different version of this article for his magazine some years ago, "Remember that what Voltaire said about God applies almost as well to King Arthur or to Robin Hood: If he had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent him. Maybe it should be scrutinized as a legend, but to debunk it entirely would destroy too much of our mythological heritage."

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DISPOSING OF YOUR COLLECTION

By Jack Schorr

Your collection, which has brought you so much pleasure during your lifetime, can, in the event of your death, become a real burden upon your spouse or survivors. In most cases, the spouse of a book collector is seldom really knowledgeable about her husband's collection. I have yet to meet one who is. In a good many cases, they are somewhat resentful of the hobby and upon the death of the collector, they attempt to dispose of the books as rapidly as possible. This is bad, because to sell an entire collection takes time, lots of effort, and planning. There is a great temptation to sell it lock, stock and barrel to someone the collector knows, instead of advertising. I have known of several who have sold back to the source where they purchased many of the books from, and you can imagine then what they got for them.

If the collector has a son or daughter or close relation who is interested in maintaining the collection and financial gain from the sale of the collection is not an issue, then that is an ideal situation.

Space is, in most cases, the reason why collections are disposed of hurriedly, without planning.

I feel that the first thing that one should do is to have a brief inventory of what you have, indexed by author, publisher, date, and condition, whether a first or reprint and what you paid for it, and what you would expect to get for each book at current prices. One copy of this should be put in a safe place.

Then I think your spouse or some other responsible person should be informed that, in the event of a sale that the books are to be sold in lots. Each lot according to the author, especially where you have complete sets or near complete sets of the author's works, or in complete series. The only variation is to sell off the miscellaneous books.

The prices should be realistic and not priced so high that it eliminates the average collector. It is far better to sell books you paid \$1.00 for in 1964, for \$3.00 than to try to get \$6.00 for them, because you will have a larger audience. Of course, this again varies, because you may have picked up a "sleeper" like a first edition of *Henty* in a *Blackie* in nice condition for \$1.50. In this case, you would expect to get more than \$3.00. So each book has to be considered and you the collector should take this responsibility while you are still around and not leave it to someone who

doesn't know or possibly doesn't care. So put a realistic asking price beside each book on the inventory.

If your collection is large enough and in good condition, then some of the universities are very anxious to obtain complete collections. There are tax advantages to this. In some cases, they will send someone to pack and haul the collection away.

In this way the collection is made available to many people and is carefully maintained. This is entirely a matter of individual choice. Maybe if you are going to do any haunting, it's better to do it in a University Library than some friend's house.

Books are highly specialized items, not like stamps and coins where there are outlets in every community. It takes some doing to dispose of a collection and it may be well to consider all the angles, whether to keep it, enjoy it, and let someone else worry about it, or if your collection is completed or nearly completed to dispose of parts or sections of it now.

It's an area that's not pleasant to talk about, but one that every collector faces sooner or later, and really shouldn't be avoided.

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